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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the basic tenets of occupational segregation. It examines Washington State's school labor markets, paying particular attention to where and in what proportions women participate. It questions, based on the state's track record, whether leadership roles in school districts remain male bastions, or whether they offer equal opportunities for women. It focuses on occupational segregation and how gender-based segregation occurs when women's work can be clearly distinguished from men's occupations and when concentrations of men and women appear at different levels in workplace hierarchies. Of the state's 289 school superintendents, 42, or 14 percent, are women. By district size, 43 percent of all female superintendents work in districts with 10 to 245 students. Larger districts, however, appear to have a strict occupational hierarchy in place. Although women fill 98 percent of all office and clerical positions in schools and provide schools with 93 percent of their aides, their numbers decline precipitously when the gender makeup of vice-principal and principal slots are considered. Men still control the vast majority of key leadership positions; the participation of women diminishes the higher up occupational hierarchy one moves. Furthermore, since men are most likely to head the largest districts, their salaries are typically higher than those of women. (MKW)

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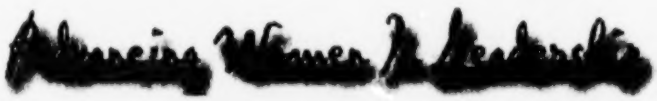

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Mimi Wolverton

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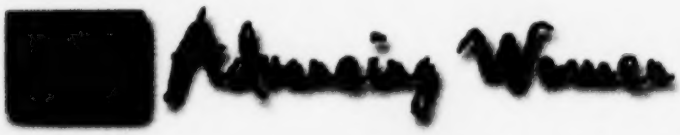

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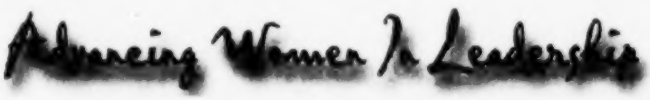

# The School Superintendency: Male Bastionor Equal Opportunity?

Mimi Wolverton

**WOLVERTON, SPRING, 1999**

The state of Washington provides a model for many states where female participation in the superintendency remains at much lower levels. But what kind of model is it?

In 1997, the states with the highest percentage of women school superintendents included Delaware (26%), Nevada (24%), California (23%), Arizona (22%) and Rhode Island (22%) (Association of California School Administrators, 1997). Ranked tenth with 16% (a figure which by Fall, 1997 had slipped to 14%) was Washington state.

Washington prides itself on being at the forefront of providing leadership opportunities for women school administrators. It does, in fact, rank above 40 other states in that area. And if we consider the salaries of men and women who head comparably sized school districts, women seem to fare as well or better than men. For example, in districts that serve between 1,000 and 2,000 students the man superintendent salary is $76,568. Several women superintendents make 4 to 6% more than the average. In the largest districts where salaries exceed $100,000 or more; 13% (7) of all women superintendents fall within the same pay category.

The only possible exceptions to these pay differences seem to arise in very small districts where fewer than 200 students are enrolled. (Washington has districts that serve as few as 10 students.) Some of these districts share superintendents or use part-time and uncertified personnel to fill the superintendent's role. While state averages suggest that the mean salary for this group hovers around $54,000, salaries for women superintendents in these districts vary widely - with a ten-student district paying its part-time, uncertified superintendent $400 per month, a district with 40 students paying its superintendent $48,000 a year, and one that serves 60 students offering an annual salary of $28,300 1(Winter, 1997). In each instance, confounding variables such as district size, location, the tenure of the position, and other duties assigned to the superintendent make viable wage equity comparisons impossible.

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The more telling story may lie in the participation rates of Washington women in school-related labor markets. This paper briefly outlines the basic tenets of occupational segregation and then examines Washington school labor markets, paying particular attention to where and in what proportions women participates. Lastly, it questions, based on the state of Washington's track record, whether leadership roles in school districts remain male bastions or offer equal opportunities for women.

**Occupational Segregation**

Gender-based workplace segregation occurs when women's work can be clearly distinguished form men's occupations and when concentrations of men and women appear at different levels in workplace hierarchies (Reskin, 1997). This latter form of job participation difference is often called vertical segregation (Blau & Ferber, 1992). Occupation segregation b gender constitutes a major social problem for working women . Full-time working women earn less than three-quarters of what full-time working men earn, and at least 40% of this wage gap is due to women's concentration is lesser paying jobs (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Williams, 1995). Interestingly, even though participation in the workplace by women has steadily increased and we have a history of political and legislative action designed to eliminate (or at least ease) such inequities, gender differences in occupations remain constant (Goldin, 1990).
In 1989, 44% of women worked in five professions that are over 80% female - dietitian, librarian, nurse, pre-kindergarten/kindergarten teacher, and elementary teacher (Blau & Ferber, 1992). In 1990, women comprised 99.1% of all secretaries, 94.5% of all registered nurses, 97% of the country's child care workers, and almost 75% of all teachers (excluding colleges and universities). In contrast, only 9.5% of dentists, 8% of engineers, 21% of lawyers and judges, and less than 20% of all physicians were women (Rothenburg, 1992). Today, about 46% of the labor force is made up of women, yet only about 10% of all women workers are in management; many of these are in mid-level positions from which there is little chance of promotion (Kelly, 1991; Dunn, 1997). In fact, most studies indicate that women hold fewer than 5% of senior managerial and executive positions in large corporate organizations (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Dunn, 1997).

**The Washington State School System**

Seventy percent of Washington's 296 independent, public school districts serve fewer than 2,000 students each. Fourteen of its superintendents who are located in some of the state's most isolated districts are each responsible for seven to 100 students (10 of these superintendents are women). In districts with fewer than 250 students, superintendents either take the helm at multiple districts (13 districts share superintendents - one superintendent has three districts, five superintendents have two districts - all are men) or carry dual superintendent-principal responsibilities.

In the very small districts, the superintendent may be the teacher as well. Districts with 250 to 600 students typically have a superintendent and one or two building principals. As enrollment tops 600, part-time directors of special education and sometimes vocational education are added. At 2,000 students these positions become full-time, and the administrative structure expands to include one or more assistant superintendents (Winter, 1997)

**Washington State's Occupational Hierarchy**

Of the state's 289 school superintendents, 42 or 14% are women (Strozyk, 1997). By district size, 43% (18 in number) of all female superintendents work in districts with 10 t 245 students. Another 21% (9) serve in districts ranging in size from 751 to 1,799 students. Fourteen percent (6) are located in districts with

2,000 to 4,999 students; 7% (3) are in districts of 5,000 to 9,000; 10% (4) work in districts of 10,000 to 14,000; and 5% (2) run districts with 18,000 students or more (Winter, 1997) (Table 1).

If we consider female participation in the state's education job market as a whole, the picture becomes even clearer. 2 Women in the state of Washington fill 98% of all office and clerical positions in schools and provide schools with 93% of their aides. Eighty-one percent of all elementary school teachers are women; 52% of elementary school vice-principals and 51% of the elementary school principal slots are occupied by women. At the secondary school level, female participation decreases. Less than one-half (48%) of high school teachers are women, and they fill only 37% of the vice-principal and 28% of the principal positions.

At the district level, across the state, 52% of central administrators (other than assistant superintendents and superintendents) are women. At higher district administrative levels, female participation again decreases. Only 35% of the assistant superintendents and fewer than 15% of all school superintendents are women (Strozyk, 1997) (Table 2).

Whether we consider only the population of women superintendents in the state or we look at the education job market in its entirety, an occupational hierarchy exists in Washington. In the first instance, we see that the majority of female superintendents (64%) are clustered in districts serving fewer than 1,800 students. Indeed, ten of the state's fourteen smallest districts have women in charge. Not only do these women have significantly different job descriptions and responsibilities from those who oversee large districts, they are relegated to the lower end of the superintendency pay scale.

Likewise, it is readily apparent when we examine the education job market as a whole that the rate of participation of women diminishes the higher up the occupational hierarchy we move. Proportionately, fewer women stand on the top rungs o the managerial ladder than on the bottom.

Further, large concentrations of women, to the almost virtual exclusion of men, are found in job types that are traditionally described as feminine - office, clerical, aides, and elementary teachers. Fewer than 2% of all clerical positions are filled by men, no more than 7% of school aides are men, and less than 20% of elementary school teachers are male. In contrast, men occupy, in far greater proportions, work categories historically classified as men's work - that of leadership and management. Eighty-six percent of all school superintendents, 65% of the assistant superintendents, 72% of the principals and 63% of vice principals in secondary schools, and almost half of the elementary school principals and vice principals in Washington are men.

**Lessons Learned**

Men still control the vast majority of key leadership positions. The state of Washington provides a model for many states where female participation in the superintendency remains at much lower levels. But what kind of model is it? Obviously, men still control the vast majority of key leadership positions in the state's schools and districts. And, even in the nine states where greater proportions of women fill school superintendencies, nowhere does the proportion mirror the overall levels of female participation in the education job market.

Being tenth in a snail race doesn't give you the right to boast. While Washington is in the top ten states with the highest percentage of women school superintendents, let's not forget that the number one achiever is only at 26%. Is that really anything to brag about?

Schools appear to be no more progressive than corporate America. Less than 15% of Washington's superintendents are women, and the majority of these serve relatively small districts.

Women's work is still women's work. The vast majority of women working in Washington schools hold clerical, aide, or elementary teaching positions.

When women do "men's" work, they do it disproportionately I less desirable locations, with expanded responsibilities, with fewer support staff, and for lower pay. Ten of Washington' s smallest, most isolated districts are headed by women who work as teachers, principals, and superintendents for salaries below the state mean.

We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into thinking that we are making progress when in fact the school superintendency remains a strongly held male bastion. Women, for the most part, fill the "rank and file" elementary and secondary school teacher positions. Men continue to retain control of superintendencies and principalships.

**Endnotes**

1 Salaries were spot-checked through personal contact with the superintendents.

2 For purposes of this analysis, I define the market categories as - office and clerical, aides, elementary school teachers, vice-principals, and principals; secondary school teachers, vice-principals, and principals; district administrators other than superintendent and assistant superintendent; assistant superintendents; and superintendents.

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